

## VOX Femina Program Notes – This Land is Your Land Spring 2018

American folk music and roots music encompasses a vast range of sounds, genres, and experiences. The earliest traditional songs have been passed down to us through oral traditions, shifting along the way as they passed through into new voices and new contexts. It is music that binds communities together with messages of fortitude and hope. It is music that is considered quintessentially American, positioned throughout the past two centuries as music of protest, of diversity, of social commentary. Tonight, we weave a tapestry of songs that have created, re-inscribed, and challenged American mythologies, identities, and aspirations.

We commence with “One With the Wind”, a piece featuring text by Larissa FastHorse and David O, and music by David O. The text includes words in Lakota which define circles of community. *Misnala*, as sung by the soloist, refers to herself. She is joined by a trio singing *Tiwahe* – representing her immediate family. Then her extended family, her friends, her colleagues appear, announcing themselves with the word *Tioshpaye*, “to be part of a circle.” Finally, her circle broadens to include her people, her nation: *Oyate*. Together, these circles of community bolster the individual and support each other, rallying with the phrase “*Hoka Hey*”, which Larissa FastHorse explains is used in this piece to “urge a person forward (like into battle) with a confidence that they have lived their lives so well that every day is as good a day to live or die as any other because the person is already walking on the good Red Road (the right path).

### American Folk Music Traditions

For several of the songs on tonight’s program, it is difficult to pin down their precise origins and dates, as they have worked their way through oral tradition into different regions, different contexts, have been published and recorded and re-interpreted many times over by many artists from diverse backgrounds.

One of the oldest tunes on the program, “Wayfaring Stranger”, is believed to pre-date the American Revolution, with origins arising from regions in the Appalachian Mountains that were populated by settlers from the British Isles and the Melungeons – people of mixed African, European, and Native American descent. This song is one of several on the program that depict similar themes of suffering and release; here, it is a contemplation of release from the toil of life into the promise of peace and beauty and a reunion with lost family (whether they were separated on Earth, or separated by death).

“Parting Friends” is a variant on this melody, also of Appalachian origin; you will hear some of the same lyrics used in both pieces. One of the earliest published versions of this song was in the 1844 publication of the Sacred Harp songbook – a compilation of shape-note arrangements of folk songs and hymns. Shape note singing is a tradition based around a form of notation was designed to help communities – who might not have had any formal instruction on reading music – sing four-part harmony arrangements. There are multiple shape-note traditions (ranging back to Guido d’Arezzo’s solfege system ca. AD 1000), but one of the most popular in the American South was the Sacred Harp. People gather in day-long events where they sing

through songs, starting first by reading through the tune using solfege that matches the shapes of the notes (triangle, circle, square, diamond). Tonight you will hear us first sing the tune, as traditionally done, in four-shape solfege (Fa, sol, la, mi) before we sing the lyrics.

The text for “Bright Morning Stars” bears thematic similarities to its kindred Appalachian pieces in tonight’s concert: life (fathers praying, children dancing), sorrow transmuted to jubilation (mothers gone to heaven shouting) all blended together in a survey of the many facets of the cycle of life. Shawn Kirchner’s arrangement of this traditional Appalachian song renders the melody in different configurations – a soulful solo voice, a homespun a capella quartet, in counterpoint, and in sparkling call and response.

Susan Brumfield’s arrangement of “No Time” combines two traditional camp meeting songs: “Rise, Oh Fathers” and “No Time.” Hymn singing was central to these evangelical gatherings that were led by itinerant ministers on the American frontier. Songs were often improvisational in nature, based on snippets of Biblical scripture, words uttered in a sermon or used in every day speech. Many of these camp meeting songs were published in various forms in Sacred Harp or other shape note songbooks. Taken together, the songs make a progression through all members of the community: fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers all are exhorted to make the journey to meet the angels.

For “Shenandoah”, ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax (who collected field recordings of folk music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) suggested that the song may have had its origins in the 19th century as a sea shanty (a work song used by sailors to coordinate the motions of their chores) sung by fur traders making their way across the Missouri River. Other versions of the lyrics tell a story of a romance between a sailor and the daughter of an Oneida chief, Shenandoah (“Oh Shenandoah, I love your daughter”). Later lyric adaptations shift the meaning of Shenandoah to refer to a longing for the Virginian landscape – the Shenandoah Valley or River. Jonathan Rodgers’s arrangement is a rolling and dreamy piano accompaniment that spills forth into instrumental solo sections that ebb and flow like the motion of the water.

“Down By the Riverside” is an African American spiritual originating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was first recorded by the Fisk University Jubilee Quartet in 1920 (the larger group, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, was organized in 1871 to tour America and Europe with choral arrangements of spirituals, raising funds for the school). Early Jubilee Quartet arrangements featured close vocal harmonies and restrained expression, but over time they took on some of the more exuberant characteristics of gospel singing. This arrangement incorporates elements of ragtime in the piano accompaniment. Once again, the trope of crossing the river appears as a play on Biblical imagery—the River Jordan -- used as a metaphor for an escape into freedom. With its striking repeated lyric, “I ain’t gonna study war no more”, this song was adapted as an anti-war protest song during the Vietnam war.

### Solo and Small Group Pieces

Throughout the evening, we have several solo and small group numbers that highlight the talents of some of our members of VOX Femina. Selections include an arrangement of the traditional folk tune “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad”, an original choral piece by Troy D. Robertson entitled “Since You’re Not Here” (featuring VOX Femina’s 2018 Choral Scholars), “Millworker” by James Taylor, which was originally written for Stephen Schwartz’s 1977 musical *Working*, and two modern folk rock songs about travel, separation, and yearning: John Denver’s 1966 classic “Leaving on a Jet Plane” and Brandi Carlile’s 2009 song “Dying Day.”

### Folk Music and Modern Popular Song

Rounding out our program are choral arrangements of modern folk songs. John Prine’s 1971 song “Angel from Montgomery” was made famous by country star Bonnie Raitt when she released a recording in 1974. In it, an old woman reflects on her life and relationship with cynicism and longing, with snapshots of dissatisfaction with the years that have gone by placed aside desperate imagery of escape: the Angel that will fly her away from this life.

The hypnotic melody of the Wailin’ Jennys 2011 song “Storm Comin’” offers words of wisdom to those approaching the beginnings of a romance: embrace the chaos, the tears, and the passion because “you can’t keep a storm from comin’”; the only thing to do is bravely invite it all in.

We close with the title song of the evening, “This Land is Your Land.” This song was written by Woody Guthrie in 1940 as a critique of the patriotic Tin Pan Alley tune “God Bless America” by Irving Berlin which had become ubiquitous on the radio. Guthrie had been living life as an itinerant musician since the 1930s, witnessing people migrating across the country away from the Dust Bowl. Tonight’s version restores one of the most controversial verses, which was not issued in the first recording from 1944 (and to this day is typically not taught along with the other verses in schools): “There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me/A sign was painted said “private property”/But on the backside it didn’t say nothing/This land was made for you and me.” “This Land is Your Land” is a response to class inequality, made with the promise that things can still be made right: that the struggle for social justice is never a lost cause.